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SUBJECT: SIERRA LEONEANS ENTHUSIASTICALLY VOTE IN PEACEFUL
ELECTIONS

REF: FREETOWN 479

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) On August 11, Sierra Leone conducted successful presidential and parliamentary elections. As of late evening on August 12, preliminary partial unofficial results showed the All People's Congress (APC) leading with nearly 45 percent of the presidential vote followed by the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) with nearly 40 percent. The People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC) was in third place with 10 percent of the vote. Voters came out en masse to vote lining up at polling centers as early as 0300 hrs. Many voting centers opened late due to the delayed delivery of ballot boxes; however, all voters were accommodated by the close of polls at 1700 hrs. The elections were peaceful and voters showed great enthusiasm while waiting in line to vote. Fortunately, the weather cooperated, which likely increasing voter turnout. There were minimal incidents of violence, and international observers commended the National Electoral Commission (NEC) for effectively managing elections operations. Initial results indicate it is likely there will be a presidential runoff election between the APC and SLPP. END SUMMARY.

SIERRA LEONE HOLDS PEACEFUL ELECTIONS

2. (SBU) Correcting many of the problems experienced during the 2002 national elections, Sierra Leone successfully conducted national elections in over 6,000 polling stations on August 11. The elections, the second national elections since the end of the decade-long civil war in 2002, and the first since peacekeepers departed in December 2005, were peaceful by all accounts and deemed a success by the international community.

PARTIAL RESULTS SHOW SLIGHT APC LEAD, RUNOFF LIKELY

3. (SBU) Preliminary partial unofficial results as of late evening on August 12 showed the APC in the lead in the presidential race with 45 percent of the vote followed by the ruling SLPP with 40 percent and the PMDC gaining 10 percent. It looks likely there will be a presidential runoff election between the SLPP and APC. That election, if necessary, would be held around September 8.

NEC OFFICIALS PERFORM WELL

4. (SBU) International observers generally agreed that NEC polling officials effectively managed most voting centers. Polling officials worked feverishly to move voters through long lines and by midday, most voters had cast their ballots. There were slight delays in opening many voting centers when ballot boxes were delivered late, due to a last minute decision to distribute ballot boxes early on the morning on

August 11 after torrential rains the day before had caused delays. At voting centers monitored by Embassy staff, polling officials acted professionally and welcomed the many international and domestic elections observers present at the polls.

VOTERS CAST VOTES PEACEFULLY, EXPERIENCE SMALL DISRUPTIONS

15. (SBU) Overall, voters were enthusiastic and waited calmly in line to vote. At voting centers with multiple voting stations and large numbers of registered voters, there was confusion over which polling station lines voters should use, causing frayed nerves and heightened tensions when voters were told they were in the wrong line after having waited many hours. The poor physical layout of many polling stations also contributed to bottlenecks when voters were forced to use one entrance as both an entry and exit point. Poor lighting in some voting centers also made it difficult for poll officials to identify voters, names and serial numbers on registration lists and slowed processing voters. However, these minor irregularities and difficulties will not affect the final outcome.

POLICE MAINTAIN NEUTRALITY

16. (SBU) The Sierra Leone Police (SLP) received positive reviews for its strong neutral performance and responded well to polling disruptions and impatient voters despite concerns about its limited capacity and neutrality. There was one reported incident in eastern Freetown where Police fired warning shots and tear gas to disperse a crowd that had begun to threaten NEC polling officials during the counting phase. The Police were able to quickly bring the situation under control. In another reported incident, police officers

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apparently removed Deputy Minister of Defence Joe Blell from a polling station when he tried to enter after the poll had closed and counting had begun. Embassy monitors observed the Police acting professionally and effectively assisting polling officials to inform voters where they needed to go to cast their votes.

DEPLOYED SOLDIERS NOT ALLOWED TO VOTE

17. (SBU) On election day, about 150 soldiers deployed upcountry in Kenema District in the Eastern Province were not allowed to vote in the presidential elections. There had been discussions at the NEC to make an exception for soldiers deployed outside their voting districts to vote in the presidential but not parliamentary elections. However, apparently no decision was ever reached between the NEC and the Ministry of Defence after the Office of National Security reportedly decided shortly before election day it would allow soldiers to be used only sparingly to support the Police.

APC AND SLPP SCRAMBLE FOR POSSIBLE SECOND ROUND

18. (SBU) With a runoff election likely, the APC and SLPP are busy developing strategies on how best to position their parties to win a simple majority in the runoff. Key to either party's ability to win will be gaining the support of the PMDC, which did remarkably well in the Southern and Eastern Provinces. Both APC and SLPP party officials are reportedly negotiating with the PMDC leadership to gain its support. Interestingly, APC officials continue to express confidence that they can and will win the requisite 55 percent from Saturday's presidential election vote. However, that looks unlikely.

COMMENT

19. (SBU) International observers and voters agree these were the best elections in the history of Sierra Leone. Despite minor irregularities, the outcome thus far has been successful. Most notably, Sierra Leoneans went to the polls

to vote on issues, not ethnically-based parties as has been common in the past. In 2002, it was a vote for peace. Now five years removed from civil war, Sierra Leoneans expect more from their elected officials, and many voiced complaints that the Government had failed them. However, despite the NEC,s and other international organizations, valiant efforts to educate voters, Embassy monitors and other observers witnessed instances where voters were confused by the process and possessed little or no knowledge of the political candidates, reflective of the low literacy rate in the country.

¶10. (SBU) The stakes in a possible runoff will be considerably higher now that one party only has to win a simple majority. It is imperative that international and domestic observers remain vigilant to the activities of political parties. Observers must stay on the ground throughout this uncertain time, and observation teams will be essential in the critical runoff that looms ahead. END COMMENT.
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